

Message

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Sent: 1/31/2011 2:07:29 PM
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Subject: NEWS UPDATES: EPA's Jackson summoned to discuss chemicals in tap water (E&E Daily)

Attachments: DIB0001

TOXICS: EPA's Jackson summoned to discuss chemicals in tap water (01/31/2011)

Gabriel Nelson, E&E reporter

With the Obama administration moving toward stricter rules on a pair of toxic chemicals that have been found in public water supplies, the head of U.S. EPA has been summoned to Capitol Hill to explain the agency's plans to the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

That issue has emerged as a priority for EPW Chairwoman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) early in the new Congress. Last week, she introduced bills that would require EPA to set standards for perchlorate, a rocket-fuel component that is believed to have contaminated water supplies in at least 35 states, and chromium-6, a chemical that is suspected to cause cancer and was recently found in the water of about 30 U.S. cities.

Boxer's bills would force the hand of the Obama administration, which is already considering limiting the two chemicals.

For three months now, the White House has been reviewing an EPA decision on perchlorate. The agency is expected to reverse the George W. Bush-era decision not to regulate the chemical under the Safe Water Drinking Act.

EPA is also planning to release a peer-reviewed analysis of chromium-6, which was classified as a probable carcinogen in a draft report last September. Based on staffers' findings, "it is likely that EPA will tighten drinking water standards to address the health risks" of the toxic chemical, according to a summary of a meeting last month between Jackson and 10 senators (*E&ENews PM*, Dec. 22, 2010).

High-profile reports on the spread of both chemicals have recently prompted action in Boxer's home state of California. One study came from the Environmental Working Group, which found that U.S. cities including Los Angeles have elevated levels of chromium-6 in drinking water.

Over the course of a week in early January, California regulators proposed tightening the acceptable level of perchlorate by six times and creating a specific limit on chromium-6, in addition to limits on less dangerous forms of chromium.

Some experts have raised questions about the study's methodology, said Matt Dempsey, a spokesman for the EPW Committee's Republicans, during an interview Friday. Ranking member James Inhofe (R-Okla.) has invited officials from Norman, Okla., and Fairfax, Va. -- two cities that were found to have elevated levels of chromium-6 in the Environmental Working Group study -- to give their response to the report, he said.

"What we're going to allow the hearing to do is unravel some of the concerns," Dempsey said.

Drinking water has often been an area of agreement in the EPW Committee, though the panel is bitterly divided on issues such as climate change and offshore drilling. At the end of the last session, Congress unanimously

passed a bill from Boxer and Inhofe that reduced the amount of lead allowed in plumbing fixtures that are sold as "lead free."

Dempsey said those efforts will continue, though he doubts that Boxer's initial offerings will go far this Congress. The perchlorate bill, for instance, was introduced in each of the past two sessions, when Democrats held a larger advantage in the Senate.

"There's a lot of bipartisan work that can be done in this committee in this Congress," he said.

Schedule: The hearing is Wednesday, Feb. 2, at 10 a.m. in 406 Dirksen.

Witnesses: Lisa Jackson, administrator, U.S. EPA; Linda Birnbaum, director, National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences and National Toxicology Program; Ken Cook, president, Environmental Working Group; Carrie Lewis, superintendent, Milwaukee Water Works; Steven Lewis, city manager, Norman, Okla.; Chuck Murray, general manager, Fairfax Water; Thomas Burke, associate dean for public health practice and training, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

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